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REJOINDER



A rejoinder to misleading articles about misleading media coverage: a case of COVID-19

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Not surprisingly, with the outbreak of COVID 19 in the first half of 2020, scholars have raced to research or comment on how this global pandemic has impacted individuals, societies, and economies. Because of the global nature of the virus, international relations and politics have become important issues as the virus spread from country to country through international travel. Some of focus in dealing with the virus has been on the comparison of how nations deal with the virus as well as its origin and source. Hence, the way media in different nations have reported “facts” differs. While not new, post-truth politics and fake news have become a catch-cry of those who want to discredit those with different opinions (Gordon, 2018; Yee, 2017). This leads to the purpose of the rejoinder. The rejoinder responds to not one but two papers recently published in *Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*. These papers are Zheng et al. (2020) and Wen et al. (2020). In response to these articles, the issues raised in the rejoinder highlights the need to critically evaluate all points of view and censorship in the media.

Several issues necessitate a more balanced approach than that of Zheng et al. (2020) and Wen et al. (2020), for the Middle Way is often seen as most harmonious (Chen, 2002). Zheng et al. (2020) state “the suspected source of COVID-19 is a virus found in wild animals”. To scientists’ best knowledge, this is true but does not tell the whole story. Leaving aside the conspiracy theories that COVID-19 was human-made (Calisher et al., 2020), it is not just that COVID-19 is found in wild animals. The virus “jumped” from bats (Shereen et al., 2020), possibly via pangolins (Zhang et al., 2020) through human consumption in Wuhan (Huang et al., 2020), which may have been at a wet market, although there is some conjecture over that (ABC News, 2020). This was omitted in the Zheng et al. (2020) commentary. This is important because it has strong policy implications. China’s wildlife protection law encouraged the domestication and breeding of wildlife for human consumption inadvertently leading to SARS and now COVID-19 (CNBC, 2020). Following the outbreak of SARS, a ban on the trade of wildlife was imposed before being lifted some time later (The Wall Street Journal, 2020). Mixed messages via enacted laws followed in 2014. While commercial farming of certain species, including tigers was allowed, in contrast, China criminalized consumption of protected species with a maximum three-year jail term as punishment (AP News, 2020). With the outbreak of COVID-19, Chinese authorities have again banned the trade of wild animals.

Zheng et al. (2020) argue that, by some media reports labelling COVID-19 as “Chinese virus” this may lead to Chinese citizens experiencing mental health issues if they are to travel internationally in the future. While both Zheng et al. (2020) and Wen et al. (2020) lament some racist headlines in the international media, for the most part the virus is not referred to as a “Chinese virus” but by the neutral name of ‘COVID-19’. It would have been useful for the authors to also question how citizens from the Middle East feel about having MERS (Middle East Respiratory

Syndrome) named after that part of the world. Given that MERS was named as such because it was first reported in Saudi Arabia in 2012 but spread to other countries (Zumla et al., 2015), there is not the same outcry from those citizens as from the Chinese about COVID-19 even though COVID-19 is not commonly referred to as “the Chinese virus” despite its origin.

Even more surprising is the silence from Spaniards about the 1918 influenza pandemic which, even after COVID-19 will still likely be, the most severe pandemic in recorded history (Trilla et al., 2008). The “Spanish Flu” was called that because people thought it originated from Spain. In actual fact, the association of the pandemic with Spain was because Spain was one of few European countries to remain neutral during World War I. This neutrality meant there was no media censorship in Spain so the Spanish media were able to report on its devastating effects. The rest of the world then associated the pandemic with Spain even though it did not originate there. As an example of how the naming of viruses occur due to their perceived origin, Spain called the 1918 pandemic the “French Flu” because they believed it originated from France. It is ironic that the 1918 pandemic was called the Spanish Flu due to its lack of censorship in that country, given China’s strict censorship regulations. Further, Wen et al. (2020) comment media channels needed to wait until “China confirmed the condition’s official name”. This appears nationalistic to wait for the Chinese authorities to name the virus. Given the global impact of COVID-19 perhaps China should have conferred with the World Health Organization as to the “official” name, than create a name unilaterally.

Zheng et al. (2020) and Wen et al. (2020) (there is a lot of overlap across both commentaries) relay reports of ethnically Chinese (or even those who appear Asian) being attacked in Australia, USA and Europe. There is no denying this. The Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Civil Rights Organizations received reports of over 1,700 incidents of verbal harassment, shunning and physical assaults across a six week period (Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council for Foreign Relations, 2020). There is no doubt that Asians, particularly Chinese, have experienced discrimination, often in their home countries. But this reporting is one-sided. Crises of this nature bring out the worst in people, regardless of ethnicity. Fear and uncertainty from the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to selfishness, greed, and unethical behaviour (Ling & Ho, 2020). Panic buying of toilet paper is one example. This unethical behaviour is sometimes channelled against people who are different from others.

While it is abhorrent that some individuals are racist and discriminate against ethnically Chinese people, there are reports of discrimination of non-Chinese in China and other parts of the world. The African community in the southern province of Guangzhou report victimization since the outbreak of COVID-19 (CNN, 2020). Some Africans have been forced from their homes, refused to be rented a hotel room, and excessively targeted for COVID-19 testing and quarantining. While there were report that this happened previously (CNN, 2016), incidents like this have increased since the COVID-19 outbreak. In turn, Caucasians, mostly Europeans and Americans, working in Africa have been subject to racism (DW, 2020) while tensions mount in East Asia with Caucasians being subject to verbal abuse for not wearing masks (BBC, 2020; LA Times, 2020). Sadly, xenophobic incidents have become so common that a Wikipedia page has been created to record such occurrences. It would be useful for the article to mention that all racism needs to be condemned and academia, especially tourism academia, needs to focus on creating a more tolerant world, rather than victimization of some people.

Both Wen et al. (2020) and Zheng et al. (2020) argue for more transparent media and unbiased journalism. While this is a great recommendation, it would have been useful to point out that the media is heavily censored in China. China’s internet censorship practices are sophisticated and pervasive (Kou et al., 2017; Tolkach, 2018). The censorship by Chinese authorities of online discussions around COVID-19 meant public access to early warning on social media was restricted (Fu & Zhu, 2020). This delayed global media attention to the upcoming crisis, which was compounded when the international media failed to see the early but weak warning signal when the outbreak was developing in China and spreading to other countries (Fu & Zhu, 2020). Wen et al.

(2020) cites an Amnesty International (2020) article which outlines seven ways COVID-19 affects human rights. The authors focus on the victimization of Chinese hotel guests. The article, however, also highlights the Chinese Government's suppression of information about COVID-19 and its insistence on controlling the news narrative, something that Wen et al. (2020) omit. Wen et al. (2020) focus on the discrimination and xenophobia rather than the more substantive censorship part of that article.

Several recommendations follow from this rejoinder. Goudsmit and Howes (2017) and Zheng et al. (2020) note that biased media coverage may result in social stigma and lead to mental health issues such as lower self-esteem, a sense of despair and hopelessness and lower autonomy. Racism is repugnant. Racism is toxic. International travel is often seen to be a force for peace (D'Amore, 1988) that can bring peoples together through breaking down negative stereotypes and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Nyaupane et al., 2008; Pratt & Liu, 2016). Given that Chinese travellers may experience discrimination and subsequent mental health issues in the future, it would be useful for the authors to expand on their solution of accountability in the media.

Other suggestions could be provided with respect to combatting racism. For example, Nissim (2014) highlights how both individuals, organizations and communities can develop resilience in light of racism. Such anti-racism strategies include community and political leaders "calling out" those who are racist and imposing strong sanctions on them; helping victims of racism think positively about their identities and understand that racism originates from faulting thinking by those who perpetrate it; provision of support, such as safe spaces for those subjected to racism; and strengthening the resolve of both targets of racism and bystanders to respond safely and effectively when encountering racism (Nissim, 2014, p. 3).

Given that the title of both papers and the fact one author is the same in both articles, scholars could be reminded that salami-slicing is generally not an accepted practice in academic publishing. Salami slicing is the practice of publishing separately segmented articles on the same topic in order to maximize the number of publications (Bailey, 2002; Rogers, 1999). One recommendation would be to write one comprehensive paper, rather than several shorter papers.

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Notes on contributor

Professor Stephen Pratt is Head of School of Tourism & Hospitality Management (STHM) from October 2018. Stephen holds Bachelor and Master degrees in Economics from the University of Sydney, Australia and a PhD from the University of Nottingham, UK. His research interests include sustainable tourism development, tourism in small island states and tourist (mis)behaviour. Stephen is co-creator of the popular YouTube channel, The Travel Professors.

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